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# **Selling veganism in the age of COVID: Vegan representation in British newspapers in 2020**

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## **Abstract**

It ain't easy being green as Kermit so famously said. Sociological research has uncovered a general derogation of vegans in all levels of society including the personal (MacInnis and Hodson 2017), the institutional (Greenebaum 2016), and the cultural (Cole and Morgan 2011). This negativity has been identified as a key barrier to vegan transition (Markowski and Roxburgh 2019), which is a particular nuisance given the litany of inequalities associated with nonvegan consumption ("natural" disasters and zoonotic outbreaks like COVID-19 included). Given that vegan claimsmaking directly challenges established power structures and capitalist interests, vegan stigmatization and derision is perhaps predictable. Nonetheless, veganism has managed to gain a foothold on the popular imagination: vegan options continually increase in availability across stores and restaurants, while, each year, growing numbers of participants register for vegan challenges (such as the UK's Veganuary and the Afro Vegan Society's Veguary). The public seems to be considerably more educated about the treatment of other animals in speciesist industries and the relationship between speciesism and climate change (Sanchez-Sabate and Sabaté 2019). COVID-19, for that matter, could offer an additional window of opportunity by lending weight to the seriousness of veganism's

claims and underscoring its potential as a sustainable solution to social injustices related to public health and environmental integrity.

This increased attention is remarkable given that traditional news spaces have historically been antagonistic. Critical Animal Studies scholars have observed that the media frequently protects the interests of the powerful, particularly as media conglomeration has concentrated ownership among a small number of elites. For this reason, social movements that counter power inequities are often misrepresented or outright ignored in mainstream media (Earl et al. 2004, Hocke 1999). This power is not absolute, however, and media producers must negotiate, to some extent, with their consumers. Having persisted for over a century, veganism has become a cultural mainstay of interest to audiences regardless of the historical misrepresentation or invisibilization of veganism. How have mainstream news channels adapted? To address this, I offer an exploratory analysis of mainstream UK newspapers to survey the new normal of vegan ideology in a post-COVID society. I expected that the time transpired since previous analyses in tandem with the mobilizing moment that the pandemic offered would result in a substantially different media discourse. I conducted a content analysis of articles mentioning veganism published in 2020, the first full year of COVID-19. In contrast to the more pessimistic findings uncovered by research conducted in the 2010s, the results of this study find a mediascape that is vegan curious and generally supportive of plant-based living.

## **Introduction**

It ain't easy being green, as Kermit the Frog so famously said. Sociological research has uncovered a general derogation of vegans at all levels of society, including the personal (MacInnis and Hodson, 2017), the institutional (Greenebaum, 2016), and the cultural (Cole

and Morgan, 2011). This negativity has been identified as a key barrier to vegan transition (Markowski and Roxburgh, 2019), which is a particular nuisance given the litany of inequalities associated with non-vegan consumption ('natural' disasters and zoonotic outbreaks such as COVID-19 included). Given that vegan claims-making directly challenges established power structures and capitalist interests, vegan stigmatization and derision are perhaps predictable. Nonetheless, veganism has managed to capture the popular imagination: vegan options are continually increasing in availability across stores and restaurants, while each year growing numbers of participants register for vegan challenges (such as the UK's Veganuary and the Afro Vegan Society's Veguary). The public seems to be considerably more educated about the treatment of other animals in speciesist industries, as well as about the relationship between speciesism and climate change (Sanchez-Sabaté and Sabaté, 2019). COVID-19 could offer an additional window of opportunity by lending weight to the seriousness of veganism's claims, and underscoring its potential as a sustainable solution to social injustices related to public health and environmental integrity.

This increased attention is remarkable given that traditional news spaces have historically been antagonistic. Critical animal studies scholars have observed that the media frequently protects the interests of the powerful, particularly as media conglomeration has concentrated ownership among a small number of elites (Almiron, Cole and Freeman, 2016). For this reason, social movements that counter power inequities are often misrepresented or outright ignored in mainstream media (Earl et al., 2004; Hocke, 1999). This power is not absolute, however, and to some extent media producers must negotiate with their consumers. Having persisted for over a century, veganism has become a cultural mainstay of interest to audiences regardless of the historical misrepresentation or invisibilization of veganism. How have mainstream news channels adapted? To address this, I offer an exploratory analysis of mainstream UK newspapers to survey the new normal of vegan ideology in a post-COVID

society. I expected that the time that had transpired since previous analyses (Almiron, Cole and Freeman, 2016; Cole and Morgan, 2011), in tandem with the mobilizing moment that the pandemic offered, would result in a substantially different media discourse. I conducted a content analysis of articles mentioning veganism published in 2020, the first full year of COVID-19. In contrast to the more pessimistic findings uncovered by Cole and Morgan's (2011) research conducted in the 2010s, the results of this study uncovered a mediascape that is vegan-curious and generally supportive of plant-based living.

### **Literature review**

The mainstream media are important for activists, given their ability to draw attention to that which is frequently invisible to the public, including issues surrounding speciesism and climate change (Happer and Wellesley, 2019). Similar to other movements, the vegan movement has attempted to utilize mainstream channels to raise awareness of injustice, mobilize activists and other resources, and put pressure on industries and policy-makers. Movement scholars have been quite clear, however, that these negotiations are not without serious risk (Sampedro, 1997; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). News coverage is notoriously onerous to control and frequently creates difficulties for activists when goals and claims are misrepresented. The vegan movement is no exception. As Cole and Morgan (2011) report, most newspaper coverage of veganism has treated it as at best barren, boring or a passing fad, and at worst a dangerous and hostile threat. Freeman (2009, 2016) further argues that major newspapers set the agenda in a way that protects speciesist industries by normalizing violence against other animals, prioritizing agribusiness perspectives, discussing other animals in objectifying terms and generally ignoring the non-human animal rights debate. More recent research supports these findings by illustrating how the state and industries generally go unrecognized as responsible for the societal problems associated with speciesist food industries. For instance, when the connection between animal agriculture and climate change

is made, it is usually individuals who are targeted as responsible for changing their behavior (Kristiansen, Painter and Shea, 2021). The marketplace, in other words, dominates the media discourse: industries are protected while individuals are scapegoated and pressured to consume as directed.

The market's control over the media is not especially new, but with the deregulation of the media in the 1990s, a small number of companies would come to control media production (Diamond, 1991). With industrial titans like Alphabet (Google), Meta (Facebook), and Apple in control of the bulk of disseminated news, social justice movements will inevitably find themselves marginalized, particularly if they threaten to destabilize the unequal system that benefits industry. Invisibilizing or disparaging activists through the media is a powerful means of protecting the status quo, but social movements may employ a number of measures to overcome this challenge. For instance, they may stage elaborate or particularly disruptive protests to force coverage. They might also recruit public relations experts to better control the media's framing of their campaigns. It is also standard practice for movements to utilize their own media channels to fully control their message, although their inability to reach comparably broad audiences could undermine their utility (and credibility) (Foust and Hoyt, 2018).

Intentional engagement with consumerism is another movement strategy of negotiation in an era of media conglomeration. As Chasin (2000) observes of the gay and lesbian movement of the late twentieth century, framing sexuality as a lifestyle congruent with marketplace behaviour helped to integrate the LGBTIQ+ community through the magic of spending power. Alcohol and car advertisements began to target gays and lesbians, pride parades became spending extravaganzas and marriage equality campaigning hastened the arrival of the gay wedding industry. The gritty politics of homelessness, hate crimes and workplace discrimination that also motivated gay rights activism were effectively

marginalized. Many other social movements of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have also negotiated with the marketplace to achieve success. Few movements seem immune to this. Also consider the feminist movement and its pandering to the ‘you’re worth it’ self-care industry (Zeisler, 2016), or the environmental movement’s ‘sustainable’ shopping approach. Even the natural foods movement abandoned its push for widely available, nutritious and whole foods for the more profitable shelf-stable vitamin and supplement business (Miller, 2017). Gopaldas (2014) argues that ‘marketplace sentiments’ (including excitement over new products or outrage over problematic products) can be instrumental in shifting culture (and ultimately even markets themselves). But this relationship with the market is a reciprocal one: consumer emotions are frequently keyed by industries to push products branded as especially ethical. Not long after a movement establishes a social justice campaign to challenge problematic consumption, companies will adapt to align their products with the movement’s framework. Gradually, the boundary between movement and marketplace will fade.

Are vegans consuming to liberate other animals or simply consuming in response to corporate advertising? This question will not be answerable in this study, but it is worth considering how corporations operating work to undermine anti-speciesist efforts. It is one thing to blatantly disparage a movement in order to undermine it; it is another altogether more insidious tactic to disrupt a movement’s potency by repackaging its politics for sale. In such cases, the power structures remain intact, profits continue to funnel to industry elites and non-human animal liberation is likely to remain a pipedream.

## **Methodology**

This study examines veganism in the British mediascape as it navigates a moment of unique popularity, movement marketization and waves of coronavirus. In a study examining Google analytics, the United Kingdom was found to be the most popular country for veganism in

2020 (Chef's Pencil, 2021). Although it would certainly be interesting to cover vegan representation in countries where veganism is less popular, this study seeks to understand the depiction of veganism in a region where it has been more or less successful, and thus poses a challenge to mainstream media, which must balance the interests of the public with the interests of its industry funders. For that matter, veganism has a more robust history in the United Kingdom than elsewhere in the world, with the Vegan Society having formed there in 1944.

Although a number of measures might have been taken to understand mainstream interpretations of veganism, an analysis of newspapers presents certain advantages: it allows for a wide survey across many regions of the country, it is (at a time of persistent travel and social contact restrictions) a considerably more convenient methodology, and it allows me to replicate the Cole and Morgan (2011) study, one of the first studies to test vegan media representation. Cole and Morgan's analysis (which relied on a sample of articles published in 2007) finds that mentions of veganism in British newspapers were few and predominantly negative. In the 13 years since, I expected that this representation would have changed, given the persistence of vegan campaigning, the popularity of Veganuary, and the omnipresent pandemic. Another change that should be considered in vegan representation in the media is the rise of alternative news channels, namely that associated with social media. In an effort to replicate the Cole and Morgan study, this analysis only contends with newspapers, but further analyses of channels such as Twitter or Facebook might offer additional insight. However, many of these alternate social media channels merely disseminate news from major media conglomerates as do the newspapers included, suggesting that similar results might be uncovered.

I opted to extract a sample across 2020, the first full year of the pandemic and one of the first years to report robust numbers of Veganuary registrants and vegan product releases.



A keyword search in LexisNexis for ‘vegan’ in UK newspapers published between 1 January and 31 December 2020 yielded 41,175 results (excluding 14 in languages other than English). Some leading news sources from the Cole and Morgan study (conducted in 2007) did not surface (*Daily Express*, *News of the World*, and the *Sunday Telegraph*), while Sunday editions that ranked separately from the daily versions in 2007 are now collapsed (*The Mirror* and the *Daily Express*). Only 19 newspapers covered veganism in the Cole and Morgan study, but dozens covered veganism in the search I conducted 13 years later in 2020. Due to the dramatic increase in vegan coverage, I was unable to code every search results as was possible in the Cole and Morgan study; instead, I coded the first 35 results for each month of 2020 to achieve an approximate sample of 1 per cent (n = 420).

I based my coding scheme on the approach devised by Cole and Morgan (2011), beginning with three basic categories of positive, neutral and negative. This original study also had several sub-codes for negative coverage, given that most of its results were negative. Articles that were deemed negative treated veganism as ridiculous, ascetic, difficult, a fad, dangerous, overly sensitive or hostile. These codes were reused in my analysis, but I found much more diversity in coverage than Cole and Morgan, such that my coding frame required additional sub-coding for positive results as well. Articles in my study that were coded as positive related to product spotlights, weight loss, climate-friendliness, healthfulness, deliciousness, ethics and how to transition to veganism.

Although the sample was coded only by myself, a colleague was enlisted to test my coding reliability across 10 per cent of the sample. This resulted in the need to clarify some elements of the coding frame. The issues were primarily twofold. First, it was unclear whether an article could be coded as *both* positive and negative; ultimately, I decided to pick only one primary code by determining the predominant tone of the articles. Several articles that would otherwise be positive started off with a negative statement about veganism being

bland or hard to cater for, as though there was a need to defend the featured vegan product or recipe from vegan stereotypes. These would be coded as positive only if the positive significantly outweighed the negative. If the article was not clearly leaning either way and might be considered 'balanced,' it could be coded as neutral. Second, it was not always clear whether an article would be coded as positive if it focused on products or services for sale. Many such articles in the Cole and Stewart study were coded as neutral, but I opted to code them as positive when there was a clearly positive spin to the product. The final dataset from my sample is available on Figshare.com.<sup>i</sup>

## **Results**

### ***Coverage by newspaper***

The most impressive result from this study was the sheer magnitude of vegan coverage. Cole and Morgan's 2007 analysis found only 397 results. My 2020 analysis found 41,175, a dramatic *103.7 times* that of the earlier study. It was quickly clear that, in just the span of a few years, the vegan discourse in mainstream British media had expanded considerably to the point of normalization. All varieties of British newspapers surfaced in the sample, but *Chronicle Live* (3.1 per cent), *MailOnline* (13.3 per cent), the *Mirror* (11.9 per cent), the *Guardian* (2.6 per cent), the *Independent* (8.6 per cent), the *Sun* (5.5 per cent) and the *Times* (3.3 per cent) were the most prominent with at least 10 articles each in the sample (Table 1). Several other newspapers, such as the *Scottish Daily Mail* and the *East Anglian Daily Times*, had moderate representation of between six and 10 articles. Dozens of other smaller, local newspapers surfaced with five or less articles represented in each, collectively representing 45 per cent of the sample.

Of the most represented newspapers, right-leaning newspapers (the *MailOnline*, the *Scottish Daily Mail*, the *Sun* and the *Times*) were about as equally likely to discuss veganism

positively as they were negatively, although most of the positive coverage was about new, exciting or delicious vegan products and services. Of left-leaning journals, the *Guardian* was much less likely to feature veganism, and this coverage was overwhelmingly neutral (usually mentioning vegan products for sale matter-of-factly without hyping up the tastiness, healthiness, launch success or growth of veganism). *The Independent* offered the most positive vegan coverage (64 per cent of the 36 articles), but half of these (48 per cent) related to vegan products and services.

### ***Positive and negative portrayals***

Across all newspapers, 63 per cent (136 articles) of the positively coded articles were of this kind (28 articles alone discussed Gregg's product line).<sup>ii</sup> Of the remaining positive articles, 27 (6.4 per cent of the sample) were predominantly related to ethics (primarily human justice issues), 18 (4.3 per cent of the sample) touted the health benefits of veganism, 16 focused on its deliciousness, eight were concerned with climate protection, eight aimed to assist readers with transitioning to veganism and the final three discussed veganism's usefulness for losing weight.

Of those articles focused on ethics, 10 related to the Jordi Casamitjana trial whereby veganism had been declared a protected philosophy. Four articles were about food security and food banks for vegans, two were about the importance of offering options for vegans and the remaining 11 (2.6 per cent of the entire sample) discussed veganism as an ethical duty to other animals. However, almost all of these 11 were couched in larger discussions about vegan activists. For instance, a few articles spotlighting the 'Most Beautiful Vegan Over 50' mentioned the contestants' anti-speciesist motivations for going vegan, but ultimately the articles were interested in the activists themselves, not necessarily the non-human animals they represented. By way of another example, a *MailOnline* article titled, 'Fed-up Farmer Clashes with a Vegan Protester Dressed Up as a "Violated" Cow to Stop Supermarket

Shoppers from Buying Milk’ discusses the vegan argument about dairy consumption, but the article overall focuses on the vegan, not the cows (Mourad, 2020). Only one article out of the 420 sampled in this study spotlighted non-human animal rights purely for the sake of the animals. This was a *MailOnline* article titled: ‘Poor Lamb! Heartbreaking Footage of a Baby Sheep Shivering in Paddock after the Herd was Sheared is Posted’ (Lackey, 2020).

Negative representations of veganism comprised a quarter of the sample, primarily in the *MailOnline*, the *Mirror* and smaller newspapers. Thirty-three of these articles warned that veganism was dangerous in some way (primarily to one’s health or to that of companion animals). Twenty-four of them emphasized the difficulty or impossibility of sustaining a vegan lifestyle, 15 ridiculed veganism, 12 pitted vegans as hostile, 10 described vegans as overly sensitive, five emphasized the asceticism of veganism and four presented veganism as a fad. These negative sub-codes are the same as those devised by Cole and Morgan, but they were comparatively much less populated in my analysis.

### ***Special events***

A number of holidays and current events impacted the portrayal of veganism. The aforementioned Casamitjana trial, for instance, surfaced quite a bit, particularly in the early part of 2020 as the trial came to an end. Most of these trial-related articles were positive (one was neutral). The other major ‘political’ event to grab the headlines involved a self-described vegan who consumed animal products on an episode of *I’m a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here*. Eight articles on this topic surfaced, all but one of which were negative (usually emphasizing the hostility of vegan audiences).

Christmas solicited 12 articles mentioning veganism (seven of which were positive, three negative and two neutral). Easter surfaced five times with two positive articles and three neutral. Earth Day, Pancake Day, National Barbeque Week, New Year’s Day, Ramadan, Sausage Roll Day, Thanksgiving and Valentine’s Day also surfaced. Most of these articles

related to menu items and products available to celebrate the occasions. Special events manufactured by the movement surfaced as well. The most popular was Veganuary, which surfaced in 39 articles (15 of which were predominantly positive, 22 neutral and two negative), while World Vegan Day pulled in seven articles (all positive). PETA’s ‘Most Beautiful Vegan over 50’ surfaced four times, all positively.

As expected, COVID-19 surfaced somewhat regularly. Twenty-two articles mentioned coronavirus or the associated lockdowns as a motivation for going vegan. Only two of these were coded as negative, 20 were positive and seven were neutral product mentions. Forty-three mentioned COVID-19 as a reason for changing shopping patterns in favor of veganism. Fourteen were coded as neutral and were mostly product related, 29 were coded as positive and 15 of these were also product related.

*Table 6.1: Frequency of discourses of veganism by newspaper*

Newspaper	Positive		Neutral		Negative		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>Chronicle Live</i>	5	1.1	7	1.6	1	0.2	13	3.1
<i>East Anglian Daily Times</i>	7	1.6	1	0.2	0	0.0	8	1.9
<i>Macclesfield Express</i>	4	0.9	4	0.9	1	0.2	9	2.1
<i>MailOnline</i>	25	5.9	4	0.9	27	6.4	<b>56</b>	<b>13.3</b>
<i>Mirror</i>	18	4.3	16	3.8	16	3.8	<b>50</b>	<b>11.9</b>
<i>Scottish Daily Mail</i>	4	0.9	0	0.0	5	1.2	<b>9</b>	<b>2.1</b>
<i>Standard</i>	4	0.9	1	0.9	2	0.4	<b>7</b>	<b>1.0</b>
<i>Guardian</i>	3	0.7	8	1.9	0	0.0	<b>11</b>	<b>2.6</b>

<i>The Independent</i>	23	5.5	4	0.9	9	2.1	<b>36</b>	<b>8.6</b>
<i>The Sun</i>	8	1.9	6	1.4	9	2.1	<b>23</b>	<b>5.5</b>
<i>The Times</i>	7	1.6	1	1.6	6	1.4	<b>14</b>	<b>3.3</b>
Other	108	25.7	49	11.7	27	6.4	<b>84</b>	<b>44.0</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## Discussion

### *The new vegan marketplace*

Although half of the sample (51 per cent) was coded as positive, this finding is somewhat tempered by its context. Nearly two-thirds (62 per cent) of the positively coded articles covered product launches. In other words, one-third of the entire sample (136 articles) related to positively framed product launches that usually prioritized describing how tasty, exciting or fast-selling the products were. Most of the neutrally coded articles (one-quarter of the articles in this study were coded as neutral) *also* related to product launches or vegan options. Likewise, quite a few product launches mentioned the lockdown as an opportunity to create new products or test new services such as takeaway menus and grocery boxes.

The data would indicate that a smorgasbord of delights await the vegan consumer, but this emphasis on consumption suggests that veganism is gaining in legitimacy through the marketplace rather than political resonance. Considerable articles were designed to facilitate veganism for readers by way of their wallets in featuring recipes with luxurious ingredients, announcing vegan festivals, and highlighting restaurants and delivery services catering to vegans. Several positive articles also emphasized the marketplace opportunities for entrepreneurs and investors, reporting on and projecting market growth. Although some of these articles spoke about the reasons why restaurateurs, developers or consumers would

support veganism, usually the ethical mentions were brief and subsumed within the larger narrative about the marketplace or market goods. A typical example is found in a piece with *The Telegraph* about a commercial chef. This feature in the food and drink section was over 1200 words long, but the only reference to vegan philosophy was confined to a short sentence and quote: ‘But when Omari turned eight he decided to go vegan, after watching a Peta video on animal welfare. “It made me sad how the animals were treated,” he recalls. “I decided I couldn't eat meat after that”’ (Lawrence, 2020). What most vegan activists would consider the central element of veganism is relegated to a soundbite subsumed within a sales pitch.

Working within capitalism to disrupt capitalism has not come without criticism. This depoliticization of veganism through the marketplace has been a particular bane of many activists (Figure 6.1). In the early years of veganism, convenience items and complex analogues were hard to come by, and this was understood to act as a major barrier to vegan outreach. The vegan marketplace today is vast and new products enter British stores in record numbers every year. However, the marketplace is far from a space of equality: it has always favoured society’s most privileged, and society’s most privileged have worked to control markets to reproduce their power (Chasin, 2000). Freedom, in other words, cannot be for sale. Veganism has shifted from abstention to acquisition; it remains to be seen whether the increasing availability of specialty vegan products can tackle the systemic inequities that maintain human and non-human oppression (Wrenn 2011, 2019a; Wright 2015). The encroachment of ‘plant-based’ labelling, which is even further divorced from anti-speciesism, only serves to compound this trend. Although this analysis did not include ‘plant-based’ in the search, I would expect similar patterns of apolitical, consumerist representation.

**<Insert Fig 6.1 about here>**

*Figure 6.1: Critique of marketplace veganism, Geertrui Cazaux (2021)*

In any case, vegan campaigners continue to craft marketing events that are sure to grab headlines and encourage spending in an effort to normalize veganism. World Vegan Day, for example, was created by the Vegan Society in the 1990s to promote veganism and its new product labelling scheme (a major source of revenue for the charity) (Wrenn, 2019b) and, based on its appearance in the October and November news coverage surveyed here, it seems to have been successful. Veganuary in January, however, was considerably more popular with the media. Many of the articles discussing Veganuary heralded the coming of new vegan products for sale, as stores and restaurants across the United Kingdom, from Burger King to Superdrug, scrambled to push their new vegan product line in time for new year's resolutions. Veganuary (itself a registered charity) caters to this sales rush as well, regularly featuring brand sponsors in its newsletter and other outreach material.

### ***Vegan ethics and climate resilience***

Whether or not Veganuary, World Vegan Day or similar events (which rely heavily on branding and corporate sponsorship) are successful is, quite frankly, contingent upon the movement's definition of success. Again, few of the positive articles spoke to animal ethics, but instead prioritized human justice. Typically, these related to the rise of vegan hate crimes, availability of vegan food in prisons, the establishment of a vegan food bank in the city of Bath and lockdown food-delivery services. Veganism's ability to alleviate climate change (another rather human-centric topic) also appeared more often than animal ethics. Otherwise, there was very little philosophical discussion of veganism, lending credit to concerns that veganism has been coopted for market purposes. This ethical dearth likely relates to the media's alliance with the marketplace and the corporate ownership of news channels; corporations that thrive in a system of inequality would understandably find radical liberatory politics problematic and worth sidelining. On one hand, this decentring of other animals



could be seen as a necessary frame adaptation. On the other, it is clearly a major deviation from the original anti-speciesist and liberatory ethic that historically has characterized veganism (Wrenn, 2019a, 2019b).

The COVID-19 factor, likewise, did little to alleviate the invisibilization of non-human animals. Attwood and Hajat (2020) suggest that COVID-19 has disrupted humanity's complacent relationship with 'meat' as it highlighted the dangers of speciesist agriculture and disrupted foodways. A new consciousness was forming, they commented, and this would surely lead to greater acceptance of plant-based approaches. Although speciesism was at the root of the pandemic, and veganism is well situated to alleviate the consequences of COVID-19 and prevent future outbreaks, surprisingly little discussion of this correlation surfaced in the sample. One notable exception was a piece in the *Independent* titled, 'Go Vegan or Risk Further Pandemics, Experts Warn' (Giordano, 2020, p. 2). This piece examines an open letter organized by scientists and Viva! activists,<sup>iii</sup> emphasizing the various links between veganism and pandemic prevention. *The Independent* even aligned Viva's initiative with its own pre-existing anti-wildlife trade campaign. It later featured an additional piece written by Viva! director Juliet Gellatley (2020), which concluded, 'We've known the risks for almost two centuries. Too many lives have been lost. The solution is at our fingertips: it's time to go vegan now.' A spin on this story in the *Mirror* was unsympathetic. Titled 'Man Sparks Outrage by Claiming Coronavirus "Wouldn't Exist If World Was Vegan"', the story primarily consists of vitriolic comments from unqualified readers who dismiss the relationship between human supremacy and COVID-19 (Dresch, 2020).

### ***Persistent veganphobia***

The ambivalence about the veracity of veganism's claim to optimal public health was part of a larger vein of media dismissiveness or distrust. Although only a quarter of the sample was

disparaging of veganism, its persistence requires attention. Many articles coded as negative seemed intent on counter-framing vegan claims as misleading. For instance, some articles worked to uncover the ingredients and nutritional profiles of vegan substitutes as less healthy and more processed. Indeed, the marketization of veganism seems to have conflated high-calorie convenience foods with ‘vegan’ food, overlooking the more basic (and healthful) staples of the vegan diet: fruit, vegetables, fungi, nuts, beans and pulses. Others emphasized the environmental unsustainability of some ingredients associated with veganism, such as avocado, soy and palm oil.

Of course, veganism has long been criticized by pundits as unhealthy for humans and incongruent with supposedly more sustainable animal-based food systems (how would we have enough plants to eat if everyone went vegan?), but newspapers today grapple with the significantly increased popularity of veganism. Newspapers must now be more accommodating in their attack. As this sample demonstrates, authors hoping to undermine veganism frequently begin an article by acknowledging that veganism is widely understood to be a healthy, earth-friendly diet (thus validating claims that were, in previous years, dismissed outright), before finishing it with refutations. Their new tactic of counter-mobilization is to hype up worst-case scenarios using extreme stereotypes of vegans surviving on infinite slices of environmentally taxing avocado toast and high-sodium Gregg’s vegan sausage rolls.

Some of this coverage relied on false claims and lacked scientific substantiation, a tactic that may have currency in the post-Trump, post-truth media age. One 2 April feature in the *Bath Chronicle* titled ‘An All-Vegan World Would Be Disastrous’ jeers ‘Where’s the proof that vegan meals are more healthy?’ It also warns that ‘the space required to sustain a global all-vegan diet would mean the destruction of billions of acres of land and forests, causing disaster for our fragile climate balance, increased air-pollution and the threat of the

dustbowls of the American Mid-West in the 1930s in which droughts could (and sometimes did) destroy entire harvests' (Box, 2020, p. 18). A piece for the *Daily Star* went so far as to blame a vegan protestor who had been plastering Welsh farms with vegan stickers for spreading coronavirus (Torre, 2020: 20). Quite a few articles also emphasized the unhealthfulness of feeding vegan diets to companion animals. The considerable frequency of this topic again suggests an act of sabotage to the vegan argument by framing veganism as just the opposite of what it claims to be. Rather than healthy, veganism is unhealthy; rather than good for the environment, it is deleterious for the environment; rather than helping animals, it hurts them.

Most of the articles coded as negative pitted veganism as dangerous in some way, either as problematic for human health or for threatening public safety. A few were coded as negative not because they disparaged veganism *per se*, but because they discussed a negative experience associated with vegan living. For instance, there were quite a few articles related to the accidental serving of animal flesh to vegans. Although these were not necessarily 'veganphobic', and actually validated vegan concerns about consuming animal products, they contributed to the overall negative light cast on veganism and underscored the 'otherness' of vegans (and one could imagine non-vegan audiences finding these stories humorous). These were coded as consistent with Cole and Morgan's (2011) originally identified theme of asceticism (if articles made vegans appear concerned with purity and abstinence), overly sensitive (if it was emphasized that the gaffe was not so big a deal as to warrant complaint), difficult (if articles emphasized the difficulty of accommodating vegans) or hostile (if the vegan consumer or vegan community's response was highlighted as particularly aggressive). One was actually coded as dangerous as the article framed it as a restaurant inspection issue. Ultimately, in light of the predominance of product and consumption themed articles, these

articles could also be interpreted as aligned with marketplace veganism since they emphasized customer service failings or faulty products.

Are these obnoxious vegan customers here to stay? Veganism as a fad did not significantly surface in this analysis as it did in the Cole and Morgan (2011) study, at least as a means of demeaning veganism or emphasizing its temporariness. However, it *was* quite common for articles to emphasize the suddenness of vegan popularity with terms such as ‘growth’ and ‘trend.’ Although this might be seen as a form of faddism, I contend that these articles are more accurately interpreted as positive. Indeed, the trendiness of veganism was commonly noted to introduce new products or services.

Another potentially negative trend surfaced in the coverage of events with shock value, such as extreme comments made by reality show celebrity vegans or, as mentioned above, the appearance of bizarre animal parts showing up in produce, restaurant orders or other vegan goods. There is a need for some nuance to this point, however. Some articles had shocking headlines that appeared to ridicule or mock vegans (a particularly favourite tactic of the *MailOnline*), but the article would then go on to provide considerable space to the vegan argument. This suggests that shocking headlines and content are probably intended as clickbait and may or may not actually care to disparage veganism. In other words, even the articles not pushing products were still oriented towards the marketplace, hoping to drive revenue through page clicks, shares and subscriptions.

## **Conclusion**

More than two decades into the twenty-first century, where zoonotic pandemics have become a part of life, and a century since activists began to formally organize a vegan movement, is British society at a tipping point for vegan acceptance? This study examined leading newspapers over the course of a year to ascertain the nature of contemporary vegan representation. The findings support the view that veganism is predominantly presented in a

positive light, especially with regard to goods to buy, restaurants to visit and festivals to patronize. Today's veganism is a more or less normal contender in the marketplace, at least as presented by British newspapers.

This monetized lifestyle veganism was predominantly detached from the pandemic. Although the sample used in this study encapsulated the COVID-19 crisis, much of the vegan coverage appears to have been following the momentum of the *pre-existing* normalization of veganism and the substantial upward trend in vegan product development and availability. Some articles did mention COVID-19, but these largely related to the space the pandemic created for testing new products or launching new services. A few articles mentioned COVID-19 as a motivator for trying veganism or at least consuming more vegan food, and this is consistent with the heightened public attention to health, homesteading and hobbying associated with the pandemic. However, the importance of veganism for preventing pandemics (and strengthening resistance to disease) could have been emphasized, but was not. Veganism as a solution to climate change actually surfaced more than veganism as a solution to pandemics. The somewhat ambiguous concept of climate change offers a considerably more generic frame than the pandemic and, notably, climate change is also consistent with 'green' capitalism's sustainable growth (consumption-centric) model. Perhaps COVID-19 represents a missed opportunity for campaigners, but it is more likely that veganism understood as a site of resistance to zoonotic disease is considerably more political and thus harder to monetize – at least for the time being.

Ultimately, the focus on vegan products and dietary practices has created a depoliticized image of veganism. Critical discussions of non-human animal rights and speciesism were noticeably absent in the sample, while the capitalist encroachment on veganism was omnipresent. Approximately half of the articles in the sample related to vegan products or services. It would be difficult to imagine half of all mentions of feminism,

environmentalism or civil rights activism in mainstream newspapers as product plugs, but this is business as usual for veganism. Many of the articles that advised readers on making the transition to veganism were actually sales pitches that were strategically annotated with advertisements and product placements. The ‘veganphobia’ that characterized the early years of the twenty-first century seems to have largely vanished, and the antidote was commodification in the marketplace. Recent research, incidentally, has noted that anti-vegan stigma (promulgated by the ‘veganphobic’ mediascape outlined by Cole and Morgan (2011) may not actually be so powerful a deterrent. Rosenfeld and Tomiyama (2020), for instance, find that, although concerns with stigma mattered somewhat, respondents were more worried by their preconceptions about the taste and nutrition of plant-based foods. Perhaps, then, the media’s emphasis on healthful and delicious new products will be complementary to the movement’s prioritization of vegan transition.

If the vegan movement were to align with the anthropocentrism and market politics of British news, the subsequent compromise to ethical claims-making would undoubtedly be cause for concern. Social movements across history have conceded that incorporation into the marketplace is key to achieving platform and legitimization, but this strategy comes at a cost. This sample makes it clear that the radical anti-speciesist ethic of veganism has been completely divorced from the pleasure-seeking, profit-focused consumerism of mainstream newsworthy veganism. Whether this approach can seriously undermine humanity’s oppressive relationship with other animals remains to be seen. The rise of alternative news channels, despite their propensity to replicate hegemonic media narratives, could be a space for activists to intervene for more animal-centric claimsmaking. Further research could discern whether or not this approach is fruitful. Further research might also ascertain whether or not social media news sources are more or less in line with social media messaging.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> See [https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Veganism\\_in\\_the\\_Age\\_of\\_COVID/17275139](https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Veganism_in_the_Age_of_COVID/17275139)

<sup>ii</sup> Gregg's is a highly popular British fast food chain specializing in the highly traditional sausage roll. It rolled out a vegan version in 2019 with resounding success, encouraging a national conversation and inspiring a variety of other fast food chains to follow suit.

<sup>iii</sup> Viva! is a mid-sized British vegan charity.